Aesthetic Legacies

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AESTHETIC LEGACIES

To my parents

Preface

THE NOTION of "legacy" is, in the main, a comforting one. It gives a sense of continuity, a connectedness between past, present, and a manageable future that makes its actual receipt a welcome prospect. Taken this way, a legacy is a gift that is also deserved, and it carries only the condition that one use it well, and pass it on to others who are rather more than less like oneself—for this is the agreement that purports to civilize historical process. Accepting a legacy supposes that one can use what one gets, and it also supposes that the givers, back down the line, will not be used badly—oh, recast and rearranged perhaps, but still recognized for their efforts and the virtues they pass one.

But comfort and continuity are not the sole determinants of the world, and so, legacies are not always welcome. For at certain times the obligations they insist on outweigh the benefits they contain. Continuity is not a virtue at those times when one is ashamed of one's parents and angry at one's sibs. The reasons, whether such history is familial or universal, are usually about the failures of the past—the failure to see what has become evident and to act on the evidenced needs. But it is also evident that every present needs some past or other. So when antagonism to a given legacy is substantial, then that past need not be entirely rejected; rather, it can be inverted, its values becoming the vices one then strives against. In this way, the present is spared the task of constructing itself from scratch.

The legacies we construe as our past emerge from a field that, from any present vantage, looks clear and ordered in some parts and indistinct or unsubstantial in others. By and large, the ordered parts are the ones to which we attach the causal claims for how we are. But this also says that "how we are" determines the past we order—or take as ordered. Of course, the past is not just what we make (of) it; it is stubbornly there in the guise of its accounts and artifacts. But just as stubbornly, we sort through these to find ones that support the values upon which we, as we say, have built the present. Fortunately, however persuasive our present appears (and however clear its past), we are never sure but that some shadow in the historical field hides a richer or truer legacy, or some veniality in the one we have. The need to search these out moves us on again; it is what constitutes our future.

The tension between these senses of "legacy"—accepting and rejecting, finding and ordering—is the general theme of this book. I approach my primary concerns—the aesthetics of modernism and postmodernism—through certain theoretical legacies I trace to origins in the philosophies of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Hegel. To trace a legacy is to identify certain themes that document the changing values between successive periods. Such themes exemplify, through changes in their own designation, the sequence of descriptive and normative accounts that identifies a legacy's historical journey. So, for example, one of the themes I trace originates in the Kantian aesthetic of "beauty" and shows its historical development in the guise of "taste" and, then, "form." Another theme has its source in Schopenhauer's concept of "will," and continues as "expression" and "intention." My third theme, fittingly, originates in the Hegelian context of "spirit," and follows this through "progress" into "criticism." Each of these names identifies a value that characterizes the aes-

thetic at a particular time, yet the order of succession shows the changes in value that link times with each other. How these linkages are understood, the mix of acceptance and rejection—supplementation or inversion—that marks their successive stages, is a central part of my subject.

Through the themes I thus select and trace, I develop a certain narrative of the interaction between art and ideology from the mid-eighteenth century through the moment of this writing. I say "certain" here because evidently there are other themes and narratives of transformation. I do not offer mine as "comprehensive"—for I do not agree with the politics of that notion—but I do believe my narrative to be evocative, which assessment, in turn, comes not from any achievement of a "dispassionate gaze" but from what, after a considerable time, has become the clearest location of my own history.

I reached my first maturity in the second part of modernism, and have since been living through its as yet unfinished transition into postmodernism. What first attracted me to this way of life were the values in which the art was then centered, values that, so it seemed, could equally be applied to the world's recalcitrance and my own timidities. This was a legacy from the first part of modernism. It proposed that without question art is important, and that such importance is not—should, could not be—confined to art's own provenance. This normative generosity, which here I take to be both a defining and limiting characteristic of modernism, eventually waned as praxis, and my interest turned to the question of its theoretical origins.

Each of the legacies I have chosen originates as an aspect of a comprehensive philosophical system. The "importance" I speak of is not to be found in the specifically aesthetic formulation but in the work it does in the overall philosophical argument—the place, if you will, assigned

the aesthetic in the formulation of reality. Of course, this last notion now seems overblown, but in the historical period here at issue, the extravagance shows itself in philosophy's incorporation of art as both subject and mechanism, an incorporation that underlies such more recent claims as that art "reveals," "expresses," "anticipates," "admonishes," its own time. Some of my friends now say that it (art) never was such; others say it is no longer. But however this may be (and it, too, is a matter of legacy), the negation of this claim of art's importance is itself important, for it continues the tracing of my chosen themes through—and past—modernism, and into the present.

I have been asked why, methodologically, I did not first identify the themes I take to characterize postmodernism and then trace them back through recursive historical stages to whatever point I establish as their origins. But the present has too much information; the "blooming and buzzing" of its incessant presentations makes it all too easy to manifest that irritating symptom of postmodernism—the confusion of immediacy with clarity. This is a symptom that, now in retrospect, is more like a "feature," and more illuminating than irritating—but it was not so beforehand. So, in this writing, I rejected the hermeneutic strategy for a different approach. At the outset, it seemed to me that our difficulties with the roles given the aesthetic in the philosophies of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Hegel are of a kind with difficulties we were having with the ideologies of modern art. I thought to test this by assuming each philosophy as a point of origin and then seeing—as the saying goes—how one might get from there to here. Specifically, I wanted to see if an analysis of how the aesthetic functions in each philosophy could be moved out of its systematic origins and construed as an ideological legacy extending into modernism. I also wanted to see whether, in the course of tracing this evolu-

tion, the similarities and differences among these aesthetics could be projected onto similarities and differences in artistic style. Characterizing these intersections—among styles, and between style and theory—would then constitute an interpretation of modernism.

In the early stages of this writing, I was not sure how far beyond modernism I wanted to extend this tracing. At a certain point, however, it seemed to me that postmodernism, whatever else it might be, was as strong a repudiation of modernist values as was the modernist affirmation of the legacies through which it rejected the alternative academic values of its own past. Given this, the evident next step was to formulate the affirmative values in postmodernism. So I continued my tracing, this time from the late, ''dogmatic'' phase of modernism, as far as I could reach into the present. This second tracing proceeds through experiences of a more recent past: the geographical dissemination of art-culture, the challenges to received modernist ideologies and institutions, and the first scattered formulations of alternatives in both practice and theory. These are experiences that I bring together into an interpretation of postmodernism—one that, given its vantage in the present of this period, will no doubt change between the writing and printing of this book.

My debts are the same now as in past writings: family, friends, colleagues, and memories of these; I acknowledge them all. I do wish to give special thanks to Joseph Margolis who, early on, identified my effort as one of ''accretion'' and gently urged me to rewrite and expand earlier drafts.

A paper in which I formulated some central issues in this book appeared in *VIA* 10 (1990), under the title ''Art and Ethics in Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer.'' Portions of the discussion on Tolstoi and Barthes in Chapter Seven appeared in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* (Spring

1990), under the title "Artist-Work-Audience: Musings on Barthes and Tolstoi." An early version of Chapter Eight was presented at the International Congress on the Philosophy of Art held in Lahti, Finland, in 1990, and printed in the proceedings of the congress.

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Introduction

1. ORIGINS

THIS IS a study of aesthetic themes in transformation. I locate these themes in the philosophies of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Hegel and then trace them through their ideological impact on the periods we know as modernism and postmodernism. My choice of both themes and origins is governed by my sense that, together, they encompass the main ambitions of aesthetic theory during that historical span. These ambitions are first tested by the roles assigned to aesthetics in the respective philosophical systems: how, for Kant, the appreciation of beauty seeks to impart a metaphysical "wholeness" to the separate cognitions of nature and morality; how Schopenhauer assigns artistic creativity the task of imaging the noumenal principle of "will"; and how Hegel sees artworks as exemplifications of "progress" in history. The later ambitions—the transformations—of these aesthetic themes move from systematic philosophy into a more direct concern with art, particularly the art of modernism. Here, the task is primarily one of elucidating the various claims of the new art: the claim, for example, that formal excellence is the achievement that best characterizes art, or that expression is both the reason and content of artistic activity, or that art functions as a critical rebuke to the historical malingering of the social order. As my narrative proceeds, the further transformations of these aesthetic themes signal the advent of postmodernism. I identify the impetus for this

move as a turn in modernist ideology in which once-radical values are commodified and institutionalized. This is a turn of belief into dogma, and the reaction to it begins with an inversion of modernist values and continues with the first articulations of a distinctly new ideology. This brings us to our present, and I conclude my study with an analysis of what I take to be the emerging characteristics of this time.

2 . DEVELOPMENT

For modern readers, the aesthetic theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often sound grandiose and unsustainable. There are many reasons for this: One is the impact of analytic philosophy with its general rejection of speculative methodology and, particularly, its rejection of metaphorical language in philosophical discourse. Another reason, an extension of the first, is our present unwillingness to assign art the task of fulfilling such encompassing ideals as these earlier philosophies demand—such ideals as "synthesizing" or "penetrating" or "exemplifying" the principle subject of the overall system. Despite such cautions, however, it is also not surprising that the period and theories in question increasingly come to attract our attention. Indeed, one of the inducements they give for our returning to them *is* the centrality there of the role of aesthetics in the general concerns of philosophy.

Our interest in the role aesthetics plays in these earlier philosophical systems can be piqued by contrasting this role with the peripheral one that is generally accorded aesthetics today—particularly in those studies where the task is to show how symbols veridically represent the world. Art is not usually counted among veridical symbols these days, and this shift in attitude is dramatized when we notice that it begins at the historical point where art

generally loses its instrumentality in philosophical system making. This shift coincides with another one—equally important to my thesis—when art gains its independence from those cultural services and obligations that, previously, had identified it as a "profession." Both these shifts introduce the period we know as modernism.

Despite the new problematics of art's social role, and despite its diminished stature as a subject of philosophical concern, art did not suffer an ideological neglect in this transition; to the contrary, its interpretations, explanations, narratives, reconstructions, deconstructions, have increased exponentially since the turn of the century. But this new theorizing was directed at an art that presented itself as free of external obligations, an art that is autonomous and unified—a "modern" art. In the modernist context, interpretations of art have largely paralleled art's claim to self-sufficiency by avoiding reference to philosophical theories about how the world is and how we know it to be. When art's practical need for autonomy came to demand that its semantics be directed at worlds of its own making, its theories followed suit. This corollary between theory and practice needs a first emphasis here: The theoretical counterpart of art's new social autonomy is the rejection in aesthetic theory of the extravagances of Romanticism and idealism—of such notions, for example, as that the world expressed by art is "better" than the actual one, or that the world of artistic representations is the world as it "really" is. Perhaps, also, this posture of autonomy had become strategically useful: Rather than fight on the old worn terrain of idealism, or the new hostile terrain of positivism, modernist aesthetic theory disavowed art's instrumentality for epistemic or ontological issues—except as these concern art's self-cognition. This disavowal actually became a strategy of consolidation: The range of aesthetic concerns moves away from